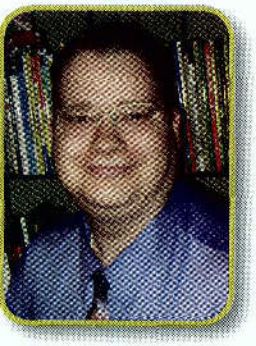
Blogs, Podcasts, and the Letter J

Blogs and podcasts are changing the way we interact with information on the Internet, but have you heard the latest about the letter *j*? These items herald dramatic changes for your library media center whether or not you are prepared for them. These are part of a reinvention of the Internet, referred to as Web 2.0, which is focused on using Internet technologies to connect people and information. As with many new ideas, the definition of Web 2.0 and its components is in a state of flux. Our understanding of the idea is influenced by the large body of practitioners involved in the effort and some of their collective musings found on the Web 2.0 workgroup www.Web20workgroup.com. While the idea as a whole extends into social bookmarking, collaborative development, and other tools, Web 2.0 is firmly rooted in the basic ideas of blogs. By developing an understanding of the hows and whys behind blogs and their near relative, podcasts, you can learn why the letter *j* will soon be the most important letter in your library media center.



By Christopher Harris

Blogs

You may have heard *blogs* defined as "online journals or diaries"—and indeed that is how many dictionaries define them—but that is a dated view of a much more powerful concept. The *blogosphere*, a term used to describe the interconnected conversation of blogs, moved beyond journaling of daily events or private thoughts long ago. Like Speakers' Corner in London's Hyde Park, which was set aside in 1872 as a place for public speeches, blogs have emerged as a digital intellectual commons that provides a soapbox for anyone with an idea to share. Though it would be naïve to think that all blogs are the epitome of professionalism, we certainly can't dismiss the entire tool.

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So what is a *blog*? The short answer: "a Web site that uses special software to organize frequent updates." Missing from this definition is the concept that separates blogging from other forms of writing such as journaling. With a great deal of credit to Will Richardson www.Weblogg-ed.com for starting the conversation, what I have come up with is that *blogging* is a "form of intentionally open writing in which the author engages with and responds to the reader as part of the development of a long-term argument, built on self-referential reflection and the inclusion of outside links." To save time, I refer to this as "open" writing. Open writing is not only public, but aware of the audience in that the sparking of a public conversation is one of the goals of this type of blogging.

Not all blogs are open, however. Sometimes blog software is used in an intentionally closed environment that the author doesn't expect to be publicly accessible (i.e., someone keeping an online journal). In other cases, a blog author may fail, by accident or design, to engage the public audience in a meaningful conversation. For those just getting started, blogging can seem like screaming into a void: there is no conversation. This is where the idea of blogging as an intentional action is so important. Blogs can also be unintentionally public, such as a teen posting personal details or compromising photographs on a teen blog site like MySpace.com, without realizing that one is publishing to a wide-open audience.

Maybe we need to talk about blogs in English classes and teach about this new open-writing form right along with persuasive essays. Robynn Clairday's book, *Confessions of a Boyfriend Stealer [A Blog]* (Delacorte, 2005), presents the story of a girl who is starting a blog as a pre-emptive strike against an ex-friend that has threatened to blog. The book is written as if it were a blog, with chapters as posts followed by comments from "readers" of the blog. The character who is the author of the blog engages in an open conversation with her readers; she responds to their comments as part of her reflective construction of her argument that she wasn't really a boyfriend stealer.

The intentional openness of the conversation is what defines a blog (not the topic), so feel free to invite your students to blog about what is important to them. Even if you assign a topic for students' writing, think about the difference in potential output between a "closed" research paper and an "open" blog about a subject. The power of blogging in Web 2.0 is that two minds really can be better than

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one. My blogging on Infomancy http://schoolof.info/infomancy is often built upon or extended by other bloggers. Classroom blogging assignments, properly facilitated, can become a digital Socratic dialogue that allows everyone involved to rise to a higher level of understanding. If you are interested in exploring blogging in your library media center or classroom, take a look at David Warlick's Class BlogMeister http://classblogmeister.com. To model this new communication medium, consider putting your library media center newsletter on a blog using BlogMeister or one of the many free blogging tools. These tools handle the technical aspects, so all you have to do is write about new resources in your library media center (or highlight those that aren't used to their potential), provide updates on the status of ongoing units, or reflect on links to ideas from the greater library world.

Will your teachers read this? Well, this is where the magic of *j* enters the mix. If reading your library media center blog is as easy as *j*, then chances are much higher they will!

Podcasts

If you are looking for the secrets of *j*, you will have to read a bit further. Blogs are only the beginning of the conversation. Luckily Web 2.0 embraces more types of learning than ever before. Blogs appeal to the visual learner, but podcasts can really speak to auditory learners. A *podcast* is basically a blog in an MP3 audio format named for the practice of listening to the audio programs on an iPod. The concept builds upon the openness of blogging but extends it by exchanging the written word for the sometimes more personal spoken word.

Schools have been working up to this idea for a long time. In many cases, students who struggle with writing have been allowed to dictate to a scribe as a testing modification or record their thoughts on tape instead of in a written essay. Podcasting extends this to anyone who wants to use audio and its accompanying enhancements to share their thoughts. Podcasters use editing software to clean up their rough draft recordings and include music as an introduction or backdrop to create a final production. Given podcasting's use of the major writing steps of rough draft, editing, and final publication, the only separation between this and a blog is the final technical step of translating thoughts into text instead of words. Remember these arguments as you share this with language arts teachers as a new way for students to publish in a Web 2.0 world.

Creating a podcast is not as hard as you may think. As with blogs, software is available that takes all the technical work away. At a basic level, you will need a computer with a microphone and some audio-editing software. A microphone with a computer plug will run about $10, or $20 for a headset that has a microphone and a headphone. If you are using a newer Mac with OS/X, then the GarageBand software may already be included. For Windows-based machines, you can download Audacity http://audacity.sourceforge.net, a free audio-recording and -editing program. GarageBand also allows you to create music from looping tracks of sounds; for Windows, you will need to purchase a program to create music or make use of other music for which you have copyright permissions. With either system, the creation and editing process is easily completed by students as young as third grade after they are trained on the software.

Like blogs, podcasts come in many different subjects and levels. National Public Radio broadcasts many of their programs through podcasting technology www.npr.org/podcast. Like blog software is used to write a journal, this is an application of the tool to deliver the same "closed" radio programs available on NPR stations. The power of podcasting is interacting with an audience—with the knowledge that the interaction is asynchronous because of the recording/publishing delay—as opposed to simply broadcasting. An example of this would be the Internet broadcasting of the reading of a classic radio drama compared to the podcasting of a revised, updated, and changing (almost living) production of a radio drama. Just think of all the writing and critical thinking that would have to go into that program!

For examples of school productions, visit The Education Podcast Network www.epnWeb.org managed by David Warlick. While there aren't currently good examples of library media center podcasts, maybe one of you would like to start! Think about the power of being able to connect to readers through podcasted booktalks . . . then think about students creating their own podcast booktalk instead of the classic book report. Or consider replacing research project presentations with podcasts that can be shared more easily with a larger audience. For an example of a weekly classroom show, check out the latest from Bob Sprankle's students in Room 208 http://bobsprankle.com/blog/.

If you are a careful reader, you may have just seen that the link to the Room 208 podcast actually refers to a blog. As noted earlier, a *podcast* is actually an audio blog that can be easily published through regular blog software. In the end, a podcast post is just a link to an MP3 file stored somewhere on the Internet on a publicly accessible Web server. So if a podcast is a type of blog, and blogs are made more powerful by *j*, then does *j* work with podcasts as well?

The Letter J

As we have seen, blogs and podcasts are a powerful way to connect to readers and listeners, but they only rise above normal Web sites because of another tool that aggregates content from around the Internet and brings it to your computer. Really Simple Syndication (RSS) works like a personal Internet newspaper

where you are the editor. Using an RSS reader, also called an aggregator, RSS "feeds" pull new content from your favorite blogs, podcasts, or other Web sites. If there have been updates to a site since the last time you checked your aggregator, the new information from the feed is displayed. You have probably seen RSS references on sites without realizing it; they are usually displayed as small orange buttons labeled XML or RSS. Clicking those links to add a feed to an aggregator causes you to subscribe to a podcast's feed so that you will automatically receive the latest episodes as they are published.

So where does the *j* come in? Well, if you are using the popular online aggregator Bloglines (www.bloglines.com) or Google Reader (http://reader.google.com), then *j* is a newly added keyboard shortcut you can press to cycle through to the next article from your feeds. With a press of a single key, you can take advantage of the convergence of all the technologies that make up Web 2.0 to easily access new information. The letter *j* allows me to read through almost 60 Web sites on a daily basis. With RSS, I don't have to click around bookmarks to visit 60 different sites. Instead, I go to my single aggregator site and let it do the work of checking 60 RSS feeds to see if there are any updates to display. Not only can you avoid wasting time by looking at already viewed content, you can more easily skim through headlines to see if the new information is of interest. If you want to get started with RSS, try one of the aggregators mentioned above and look at LISFeeds (http://lisfeeds.com) to find library media center blogs that you can subscribe to in your aggregator.

RSS and Your Library Media Center

Blogs and podcasts are powerful new communication tools, but if you aren't accessing them through their RSS feeds, you are missing their true power. Web sites are different from books; we have become comfortable with those differences. RSS changes everything. A blog without RSS is just a Web site that is updated more frequently than others; however, the updates don't matter—they only become real to you when you find the time (and remember) to check the blog site. But with the power of *j*, those updates are instantly and automatically sent to you. The new flow of information is real time. Ask yourself: Can your teachers subscribe to an RSS feed that will let them know when you add a new resource (buy a book or identify a new Web site) for their subject area or grade level? Then ask yourself: What would that do to the interaction between the school and the library media center? The answer is *j*. ■

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Ask Mr. Technology

By Joe Huber

Podcasting

Q: I want to do a podcast for my class. Is there an inexpensive and easy way to do this?

A: Yes. The first thing to remember is that podcasts are just MP3 files. You will need a good sound file editor. Audacity http://audacity.sourceforge.net/ is available free for both Mac and Windows. After you prepare your podcast you will need to post it on a Web server. If you are really interested in doing podcasts, I suggest you purchase *Secrets of Podcasting: Audio Blogging for the Masses* by Bart G. Farkas (Pearson Education, 2006).

Transferring Files from iPod

Q: I have several hundred songs on my iPod. Is there any way to get these off and record them on CD?

A: You can use Senuti http://wbyoung.ambitiouslemon.com/senuti/ or iPodRip http://www.thelittleappfactory.com/application.php?app=iPodRip for Mac or PodPlus http://www.purpleghost.com/ProductDetail.aspx?productid=7 for Windows.

Or if you are really tech savvy, you can do the following:

1. Enable your iPod for use as an external drive. Connect your iPod to a computer with iTunes installed on it. Open Windows Explorer and right-click your iPod on the left-hand menu pane. Select iPod options, and near the bottom of the screen, check the "Enable Disk Use" box.
2. Connect the iPod to the destination computer. If iTunes comes up, ignore it. You will use Windows to copy the music.
3. Navigate to your iPod in Windows. Wait until the iPod has enough time to connect (this may take several minutes). Open the Start Menu. Select My Computer, and you will see the iPod in the My Computer folder (In Windows Media Center it will be under Devices with Removable Storage). Select MP3 file via the intermediate WAV file.
4. View iPod contents. Double-click the iPod to open it. If you do not already have the "view hidden file" options enabled, you must do so. (Go to tools on the menu bar, then down to Folder Options, and select the View tab; now click the "Show hidden files and folders" radio button.)
5. In the iPod folder you will see several half-grayed-out folders. Double-click on the one called iPod Control, then double-click the Music folder. You will see numbered folders. Each one will contain between 40 and 60 songs.
6. Create a destination folder on your hard drive.
7. Copy the music to the destination folder (this will copy all of your songs to your hard drive. If you want a specific song follow the next few steps.)
8. Click the search button at the top of the iPod music folder. The search column will appear. Select "Search for files and folders" as your search type. DO NOT enter any text into either of the search boxes. Select iPod in the "Look In" dropdown menu. In Advanced Options select "Search hidden files and subfolders" then click Search Now.
9. After the results appear, sort them by Type at the top of the file-type column. You will now see all of your iPod's music in chunks, separated by file type.
10. Select the music you want and copy it to your computer. ■

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TITLE: Blogs, Podcasts, and the Letter J
SOURCE: Library Media Connection 25 no2 O 2006
PAGE(S): 60-2
WN: 0627508137017

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